

Romania - Polity Contestation and the Resilience of Mainstream Parties

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10 Romania – Polity Contestation and the Resilience of Mainstream Parties

Endre Borbáth

10.1 Introduction

Among the fifteen countries examined in the current volume, the Romanian case stands out for two reasons: a dominance of political issues and a relative instability of the ideological structure. Political parties in Romania show much flexibility in adjusting their issue positions from one election to another, which results in a relatively fluid ideological structure. Although the large swings of the parties' issue positions indicate a low level of party-system institutionalisation, parties show considerable resilience. The extent of this stability is surprising given the generally high volatility in the CEE region (Chapter 11 on Latvia is illustrative of this phenomenon). Nevertheless, the economic and the accompanying political crises (see Chapter 1) left their mark on the stability of the parties and resulted in a high level of extra-systemic volatility. This chapter examines the dynamics of party competition in the light of the two forms of crisis in a comparison of four electoral campaigns over time (2004–2016).

As the chapter argues, political issues are instrumental to the survival of mainstream parties. On issues like reforming democracy or fighting corruption, parties can switch positions from one election to another without losing their electorate to their competitors. There are three background conditions which contribute to the high share of political issues and to the survival of mainstream parties: (1) the electoral system, (2) the semi-presidential institutional design, and (3) a clientelistic resource allocation. First, the relatively restrictive electoral system keeps new parties outside the system and helps established parties survive. Second, the semi-presidential constitutional set-up heightens animosities between the prime minister and the president by splitting government responsibilities between the two offices. Third, established networks of clientelism contribute to the survival of the mainstream parties independently of their programmatic appeals.

Given the severity of the recession in Romania, one might expect the economic crisis to have had a profound impact on party competition. Adding in the blurred programmatic appeal of parties and the important role played by clientelism, it would seem as if all the pre-conditions were met for popular anger, fuelled by economic problems, to drive out the mainstream parties. When a political crisis followed the economic crisis and led to a failed attempt to suspend President Băsescu, one might have expected the electorate to lose all its trust in the parties. However, the 2016 election brought a landslide victory for the post-communist left in a regional context where such parties are generally in decline (see Chapter 8). Even though new parties entered parliament, established parties kept their dominant positions and muddled through the crises.

The reaction of the party system to the economic and political crises reveals important mechanisms in the dynamics of party competition. On one hand, the post-communist left and one of its main adversaries on the right managed to survive the crises and are still the most popular parties. On the other hand, new parties entered parliament, and for the first time the mainstream parties were faced with serious challengers. I suggest that the survival of the mainstream parties is linked to their ability to shift their positions on political issues, the most salient conflict in the party competition.

I start the chapter in Section 10.2 with a review of the traditional conflicts which characterise politics in Romania. In Section 10.3, I introduce the institutional framework and the main parties in the party system. Against these background conditions, I discuss the parties' reactions to the economic and political crises in Section 10.4. Next, in Section 10.5, I use the parties' issue positions as reported in two newspapers to map and explain party competition during four parliamentary election campaigns from 2004 to 2016. Section 10.6 concludes with a general discussion of the nature of the party competition and the effects of the political and economic crises.

10.2 Cleavages, Census and Issue Divides

Although some patterns of electoral behaviour are fairly consistent over time, the underlying electoral coalitions in Romania do not correspond to all three elements in Bartolini and Mair's (1990: 215) definition of cleavages. Conflicts either (1) are not rooted in socio-structural differences, (2) do not distinguish between normative identities, or (3) are not mobilised by parties. Therefore, I employ Deegan-Krause's (2013) framework, which distinguishes between census and issue divides. As this section explains, the lack of 'full cleavages' provides the supply-side

condition for the parties to be able to shift their programmatic appeals and to rely on clientelism.

In terms of its consequences for citizens' lives, the most important conflict in Romanian politics has been an overlapping class and periphery census divide. The underlying conflict is rooted in demographic and behavioural elements in terms of support for parties, but it does not involve a consciously articulated group identity (Deegan-Krause 2013: 42), which is why it is called a 'census' divide. As surveys show, around 40 percent of the Romanian electorate, primarily the lower socioeconomic groups, are not able to place themselves on a left-right axis (Marian 2013: 112). The underlying socioeconomic divide is exploited by parties, but it hardly appears in terms of class identities. As one of the most neoliberal market economies (Bohle and Greskovits 2012: 182–223), Romania struggles with the highest level of income inequality within the EU (European Commission 2017: 78), with 40 percent of citizens living in poverty or social exclusion. A considerable share of these citizens rely on welfare benefits and services provided by the state (e.g. healthcare). In contrast, those who are somewhat better off and can be considered the relative 'winners' from the transition expect the state to improve the quality of services, to 'clean' up corruption and to increase efficiency. Parties cater to the marginalised segments of society with clientelistic transfers without adjusting their programmatic appeal. A range of studies based on experimental (Mares and Muntean 2015) and observational (Kitschelt et al. 2012) evidence show a high prevalence of clientelism in Romania relative to other eastern European countries. In this regard, party organisation and the local elite play a crucial role. Accordingly, the participation rate follows a surprising pattern: poorer regions record higher levels of electoral participation. Clientelistic practices fostered by the lack of economic group identities allow parties to gain the support of marginalised voters without pressure to formulate clear positions on the economy in their programmatic appeals. The most easily observed implication is a relatively stable electoral map from one election to another (King and Marian 2011, 2014).

In addition to the conflict around 'economic' issues, there are three 'cultural' issue divides with a consistent albeit less important influence on party competition. In the 1990s, as in other eastern European countries, Romania experienced the emergence of a mostly symbolic divide between communists and anti-communists, which was linked to the lustration process and to property restitution. The relevance of this divide declined over time, partly because the communist successor party consolidated its position and partly because former communist officials penetrated all the major parties (Pop-Eleches 2008). A further divide originates from the

interplay between ethnic nationalism and religiosity. The contentious demands of the Hungarian minority, represented by one of the most successful (ethnic) parties (Kiss, Barna and Székely unpublished), strengthen nationalism. The divide is reinforced by a religious distinction between Hungarians (who are mostly Roman Catholic or Calvinist) and Romanians (who tend to be Orthodox or Greek Catholic). However, despite the high level of religiosity of Romanians and the financial support of churches, the party structure does not represent a secular–religious cleavage. In fact, parties rely on the churches to mobilise the electorate. To the extent to which anti-communism, nationalism and religiosity form a loosely defined ‘cultural’ dimension, it relates to the pace of modernisation/Europeanisation. Although these positions are often unclear, modernisers expect the ‘Westernisation’ of Romania to further what they consider progressive politics. By contrast, traditionalists identify with defensive nationalism (see Chapter 1) and aim to protect the ethnic Romanian way of life from its internal or external enemies. This links political issues to the cultural dimension. Penescu (2002), for instance, argues that, apart from the conflict between the two ethnicities, nationalism mostly concerns the extent to which it is desirable for Romanians to politically self-organise and not blindly adapt to the requirements of transnational bodies like the EU.

10.3 The Institutional Framework

The political mobilisation of these divides is shaped by the institutions Romania adopted during its transition to democracy. Two institutions have a particularly strong influence on the issue repertoire of party competition, and they played an important role in shaping the parties’ reactions to the economic and political crises: semi-presidentialism and the electoral system. As this section describes, both semi-presidentialism and the electoral system contribute to blurred accountability and allow parties to shift the blame for policy failures and to adapt issue positions to the power relations of the moment.

After 1989, Romania adopted a semi-presidential institutional structure with a directly elected president who has similar but somewhat weaker prerogatives than his/her French counterpart. After consulting with the parties in parliament, the president nominates the prime minister, who shares his/her role as leader of the executive. The prime minister chairs the government, which formulates and implements public policies. The prime minister is accountable to parliament and most often comes from the party with the highest share of the vote. Even though the prime minister has the greatest power in formulating public policies, the

president can veto the parliament's decisions and make it difficult for the government to implement its programme. In turn, parliament can suspend the president, but this is conditional on approval by a popular referendum, which in order to be valid requires a turnout of more than 50 percent of the electorate.

The system requires close cooperation between the two offices. Cohabitations, i.e. when the president and the prime minister come from different political parties, considerably sharpen political conflict. In such situations, the partisan conflict penetrates the executive branch, with the government and the president often working to undermine each other's position. Although the president is supposed to stand above party lines, all elected presidents have tried to help their own party gain power. Therefore, conflicts arising from cohabitation tend to escalate beyond regular political debates and target the institutions themselves. In the 1990s, conflicts between President Iliescu and Prime Minister Roman led to violent protests, although both were members of the same party. In the period under examination, President Băsescu tried to undermine parliament, while Prime Ministers Ponta and Tăriceanu tried to curtail the powers of the president.

Given that the Romanian constitution is particularly difficult to revise, semi-presidentialism can hardly be changed. Since the 1989 regime change there has only been one constitutional reform (2003). This was driven by external pressure to comply with some of the requirements of the NATO and the EU accession processes. During the constitutional reform, the term of the president was prolonged to five years to avoid overlapping parliamentary and presidential elections. While in other semi-presidential countries cohabitation is often seen as a problem to avoid, in Romania the lack of cohabitation was perceived as a problem (Gherghina and Hein 2016, 183). The constitutional reformers attempted to strengthen the checks and balances by increasing the chances of non-aligning majorities. Therefore, the last time that the president and parliament were simultaneously elected was the 2004 election.

In practice semi-presidentialism creates a split executive, with the prime minister as the 'biggest loser of the constitutional system' (Gallagher and Andrievici 2008: 146). Despite the policy-making powers of the prime minister, the president is often able to take credit for popular decisions. The president's ability to dominate the political landscape is reflected by higher levels of turnout in presidential elections compared to parliamentary ones (see Chapter 16). Even though the constitutional change was designed to give a direct mandate to the prime minister's party, the differential turnout continued, and the president is often seen

as more legitimate. Nevertheless, the president is not able to design or implement policies without the prime minister. Therefore, the split executive and blurred incumbency allows parties to mutually blame their opponent for policy failures whether they are in government or delegate the president.

Next to semi-presidentialism, the second component which facilitates shifting issue positions and helps established parties survive is the electoral system and the law on political parties. During the period examined here, these laws changed frequently. In the 2004 election the parliament was elected using a closed-list proportional system with a 5 percent threshold and forty-one electoral districts (all the counties plus Bucharest). After an extensive debate, with President Băsescu and civil society organisations pushing for a majoritarian system and some of the parties insisting on keeping the system proportional, a 2008 reform established a compromise. The new system kept the closed party list and introduced a two-tier redistribution allowing for proportional seat allocation. It granted a direct mandate to candidates who won an absolute majority of the vote in their district. The reform did not lead to partisan effects but made the election of individual candidates less predictable (both for voters and parties) and increased the role of individuals as opposed to parties (Marian and King 2010; Marian 2013: 31–42). Therefore, the new system contributed to blurring party positions by making the national campaign less visible relative to the campaigns of individual candidates. In 2015, the changes introduced in 2008 were mostly withdrawn, and the 2016 parliamentary election was conducted according to similar rules to those in place in 2004.

Throughout the history of democratic elections, the electoral system and the regulations on political parties have been successfully used by established parties to facilitate cartelisation and create a legal barrier against outsiders entering parliament (Popescu and Soare 2014). According to the law on parties, to establish a new party 25,000 signatures needed to be collected from citizens residing in at least half of the counties. This provision made it extremely hard to register new parties. Moreover, the threshold kept them outside of parliament even if they were registered. Therefore, small parties often became satellite organisations of more established formations and ran in coalition with them to ensure their presence in parliament. The law was changed in 2015 and made it possible to register a new party with three founding members. Nevertheless, the reform maintained a high barrier for newcomers by requiring them to collect the signatures of 1 percent of the electorate to put up candidates (180,000 signatures in 2016). As a result of this reform, seven new parties contested the 2016 election (Dumitru and Voicu 2016:

18), one of which entered parliament (USR). Two additional new parties entered parliament, but they were registered before the 2015 reform. In comparison to other eastern European countries, these dynamics have created a party system with relatively stable party labels (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015), which nevertheless frequently form pre-electoral coalitions.

10.4 The Party System

Table 10.1 presents the election results for the different parties in the period 2000–2016 along with statistics on the Romanian party system. As the table shows, the Romanian party system does not follow a linear development over time. During the period 2000–2012 it seemed as if the system had stabilised, and Romania was regularly cited as an example of a system in which new parties had little chance of entering (e.g. Engler 2016: 281). Nevertheless, the 2016 election showed a sharp increase in extra-system volatility and in fragmentation. In 2016, a previously important party disappeared (PDL) and three new parties entered parliament (ALDE, PMP, USR). Despite these changes, the combined vote share of mainstream parties did not fall and stayed at the relatively high level of 80.5 percent. Across the four election campaigns, turnout declined and polarisation remained relatively low.

According to their own characterisations, the mainstream political parties can be grouped into four families. Most of them have been present since the founding election in 1990: Social Democratic, National-Liberal, Christian-Democratic and ethnic Hungarian parties. Even though these parties have organised themselves into all the possible government coalitions, I treat the National-Liberal and Christian-Democratic parties as the mainstream right in opposition to the mainstream left, the Social Democrats. In addition, I introduce two types of challenger parties which have never been in government: radical right and anti-establishment reform parties.

As the asymmetry indicator in Table 10.1 shows, in Romanian politics the mainstream left is more popular than the mainstream right. The main party on the left has been the post-communist Social Democratic Party (PSD). It was even the most popular party in 2008, when the mainstream right collectively won more votes than the mainstream left. The PSD has often run in coalition with the Romanian Humanist Party (PUR), later renamed the Conservative Party (PC), a minor political force which has never entered parliament independently of the PSD. In 2016, the PC merged with a liberal faction to form ALDE and entered parliament. In the 1990s, another influential party had competed in the Socialist

Table 10.1 *Romanian election results and party-system features*

| | Election | 2000 | 2004 | 2008 | 2012 | 2016 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|------|
| Election results (vote shares) | <i>Mainstream left</i> | 36.6 | 36.6 | 33.1 | 58.6 | 49.6 |
| | PSD | 36.6 ¹ | 36.6 ² | 33.1 | 58.6 ³ | 44.1 |
| | ALDE | - | - | - | - | 5.5 |
| | <i>Mainstream right</i> | 22.9 | 33.2 | 51.0 | 16.5 | 24.7 |
| | PNL | 6.9 | 31.3 ⁴ | 18.6 | - | 19.5 |
| | PD/PDL | 7.0 | - | 32.4 | 16.5 ⁵ | - |
| | PMP | - | - | - | - | 5.2 |
| | PNȚCD | 5.0 | 1.9 | - | - | - |
| | ApR | 4.0 | - | - | - | - |
| | <i>Ethnic Hungarian</i> | 6.8 | 6.2 | 6.2 | 5.1 | 6.2 |
| | UDMR | 6.8 | 6.2 | 6.2 | 5.1 | 6.2 |
| | <i>Radical right</i> | 19.5 | 15.2 | 5.5 | 1.3 | 3.7 |
| | PRM | 19.5 | 13.0 | 3.2 | 1.3 | 1.0 |
| | PNG | - | 2.2 | 2.3 | - | - |
| | PRU | - | - | - | - | 2.7 |
| | <i>Anti-establishment</i> | - | - | - | 14.0 | 8.6 |
| | <i>reform parties</i> | | | | | |
| | PPDD | - | - | - | 14.0 | - |
| | USR | - | - | - | - | 8.6 |
| Party system features | Turnout | 65.3 | 58.5 | 39.2 | 41.8 | 39.5 |
| | (Chamber of Deputies) | | | | | |
| | Volatility extra-system | 10.2 | 6.0 | 5.9 | 7.0 | 26.6 |
| | Volatility within-system | 27.2 | 12.4 | 11.6 | 11.9 | 4.0 |
| | Volatility total | 37.4 | 18.4 | 17.4 | 18.9 | 30.6 |
| | Effective no. of parties | 5.2 | 3.9 | 3.9 ³ | 1.6 | 3.7 |
| | Mainstream party vote | 69.1 | 76.0 | 90.3 | 80.2 | 80.5 |
| | Asymmetry ⁶ | 18.9 | 5.3 | -17.83 | 42.1 | 24.9 |
| | Polarisation (0 to 1) | - | 0.12 | 0.17 | 0.08 | 0.19 |

¹ The party ran as PDSR; PSD was established from the merger of PDSR and the minor party of PSDR.

² In 2004 and in 2008 PSD ran in coalition with PUR, the party which subsequently turned into PC.

³ PSD ran in coalition with PNL, PC and UNPR, a small splinter party, as the Social Liberal Union (USL). I include the results of USL under PSD given PNL was the junior partner in the coalition.

⁴ PNL ran in coalition with PD, the party which subsequently turned into PDL.

⁵ PDL ran in coalition with two small parties, FC and PNȚCD.

⁶ Vote share of mainstream left minus vote share of mainstream right.

Sources: Own calculations, ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2016).

camp, the Democratic Party (PD). Following the tradition of the Romanian Communist party, which combined ethnic nationalism with communist ideology, these parties represent a leftist position in terms of 'economic' issues and a more conservative position in terms of 'culture'.

In contrast to the dominance of PSD on the mainstream left, the mainstream right is more fragmented. In 2004, the Democratic Party (PD) changed its leader to Traian Băsescu, a charismatic politician who recognised the ideological space in the Christian Democratic camp and gradually switched the party to the right. The PD took on a new name, and, under the leadership of Băsescu, renamed as the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL), it became the main competitor in the Christian Democratic camp. As old conservative formations disappeared (ApR, PNȚCD), PDL emerged as the most popular party on the right, with the National Liberal Party (PNL) as the second-largest formation. PNL is a 'historical party' with links to the interwar period and was re-established after 1989. In 2012, the PNL ran in coalition with PSD, forming an electoral alliance across the left-right divide. Despite its popularity, the PSD-PNL coalition did not prove stable, and in 2016 PNL merged with PDL, re-establishing the left-right poles. After a poor PDL electoral performance in 2012 and the departure of its founder, Băsescu, the merger between PNL and PDL was regarded as the end of PDL. Traditionally parties on the right represent somewhat liberal economic positions with an anti-communist ideology. In terms of their programmatic appeal there is hardly any consistent difference to distinguish between them.

In 2016 two new parties entered parliament and joined the mainstream. Although new parties are often contrasted with the mainstream, both parties were linked to established formations and were founded by politicians who had previously served as prime minister (Călin Popescu Tăriceanu – ALDE) or president (Traian Băsescu – PMP). Therefore, even though they were technically new, they were different from challenger parties due to their links to the existing political elite. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), a left-wing liberal party, joined forces with the remains of PC/PUR and entered parliament with a promise to help PSD form a government. The People's Movement Party (PMP) ran on a platform previously associated with PDL and promised to oppose PSD 'at all costs'.

As the table shows, the mainstream parties are popular: even at their worst they are able to secure 70 percent of the vote. The remaining 30 percent is relatively volatile and has served as a breeding ground for challenger parties forming a 'new party subsystem' (see Chapter 1). Up until 2008, the main challenger party came from the radical right. The largest radical right party was the Greater Romania Party (PRM),

the leader of which entered the second round of the presidential election in 2000. While the radical right was the main challenger from 1989 to the 2000s, the strength of these parties sharply declined in the period under study, and in 2008 they failed to enter parliament. As the table shows, the decline in their popularity was partly due to fragmentation and the emergence of new competitors. First the New Generation Party (PNG) and then in 2016 a new radical right party, United Romania (PRU), competed and ran a relatively visible campaign but failed to enter parliament. When in parliament, the radical right has spoken out against the political class and the Hungarian minority. The Hungarian minority party (UDMR) has been present in parliament since 1990 and has served as a coalition partner of governments of parties from both the right and the left.

The 2012 and the 2016 elections saw the rise of a new type of challenger: anti-establishment reform parties (AERPs), as defined by Hanley and Sikk (2016: 523). These authors note the lack of such parties in the Romanian context (p. 524), but their analysis does not include the People's Party Dan Diaconescu (PPDD) and the Save Romania Union (USR). Both PPDD and USR mobilised on an anti-establishment platform and built on genuinely new organisations. As opposed to the 'old' challengers from the radical right, these parties were less nationalistic. As the first new party to enter parliament on its own since 1989, PPDD achieved a stunning 14 percent, while USR gained 8.6 percent of the vote. However, PPDD did not manage to endure the test of time. After its leader failed to enter parliament, the party was faced with heavy intra-parliamentary party switching and disappeared during the 2012–2016 legislative term. In contrast, USR benefited from a wave of anti-corruption protests and has managed to survive until the time of writing.

10.5 Crises and Crisis Dynamics

In the Romanian case, the party competition dynamics during the economic and the political crises have partly diverged from the step-wise pattern of electoral accountability observed in other European countries (see Chapter 1). While in other European countries in the aftermath of the economic crisis voters first turned to the mainstream opposition and then to challenger parties, in Romania the vote for mainstream parties did not decline. As in the Hungarian case, the mainstream opposition PSD party won the first (2012) and the second (2016) post-crisis elections. Weak institutions and a high share of political issues allowed the mainstream parties to shift their programmatic appeal and avoid punishment for the crisis. An important pre-condition in this regard was the role

played by the incumbent president, Traian Băsescu. This section details the development of party competition since the 2004 election and the facilitating role played by institutions, which ultimately led to the survival of the mainstream parties.

In 2004, Traian Băsescu (PDL) was elected as president. He was a polarising figure who did not shy away from using his power to bend institutions to serve his own political goals. His actions defined the political conflicts in the period of his ten-year presidency (2004–2014), and his two terms re-shaped the role of presidents in Romanian politics. Băsescu fostered an image of being the president of the people fighting against a corrupt elite. The fight against corruption had long been seen as a major issue in Romanian party politics, but before Băsescu it was mostly an issue of the radical right. He was the first candidate from a mainstream party to compete with a programme of fighting corruption. This led to his successful election and re-election (2004, 2009) on the most populist platform in Romanian politics at the time (Hawkins 2013).

Apart from his advocacy for the fight against corruption, Băsescu used his power to nominate the prime minister to influence government formation. He used this prerogative on two occasions to split parties and form a new parliamentary majority made up of parties from the mainstream right. The first time this occurred was in the aftermath of the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections, when instead of choosing the candidate supported by PSD-PUR, Băsescu nominated his political ally Tăriceanu (PNL). The second time was in the midst of the shock period of the financial crisis before the 2009 presidential election, when he refused to nominate Klaus Iohannis, then the PSD-PNL candidate. Instead, and this proved to be a consequential step for the long-term development of party competition, he helped Emil Boc (PDL) form a slim parliamentary majority with UDMR and collaborated with Boc to implement austerity measures in response to the shock of the financial crisis. On both occasions, he was successful in forging a new alliance due to intra-parliamentary party switching and party splits. Before his term, the president's role in nominating the prime minister had been seen as a formality, and no other president had used his power to change the majority in parliament.

Political parties (apart from PDL) regularly accused Băsescu of abusing his mandate and perceived his actions as direct threats to their decision-making autonomy. To fight the challenge of Băsescu, they twice initiated the procedure to suspend the president from office. Both times parliament voted for his dismissal, but, as mentioned, suspension from office is conditional on a mandatory popular referendum, which in both 2007 and 2012 allowed Băsescu to stay on. The second suspension came

close to succeeding with the support of an overwhelming majority of voters, but ultimately it failed due to the 50 percent turnout provision.

By the time of the second suspension attempt, Băsescu's popularity had declined markedly, not the least due to his role in the management of the economic crisis.¹ This crisis first entered party competition in June 2009, when the PSD-PDL government turned to the IMF for a 20 billion euro credit but postponed austerity measures until after the 2009 presidential election. To compete in the presidential election, PSD left the government, and all the austerity policies had to be implemented by a narrow centre-right PDL-UDMR coalition. These measures were announced by the re-elected President Băsescu and included a 25 percent cut in the salaries of public officials, a cut of thousands of state jobs and an increase in VAT from 19 percent to 24 percent. Most of the austerity policies were justified by IMF demands and were implemented in close cooperation between President Băsescu and the PDL-UDMR government. Following these measures, the unpopular centre-right Boc government survived seven motions of no confidence and continued in office until the beginning of 2012. In the 2012 election PDL lost most of its voters, and in 2014 what remained of it merged with PNL, making it one of the few former government parties to completely disappear.

The 2012 PSD-PNL grand coalition played an instrumental role in the collapse of PDL. Even though parties from the left and the right often formed coalition governments, PSD and PNL were the first to form a pre-electoral coalition across the left-right divide. The dramatic loss of PDL's popularity and Băsescu's involvement in keeping Boc and PDL in power forged this unusual alliance. Even though Băsescu's election in 2004 was supported by PNL, in 2007 he made a successful attempt to break up PNL and form PDL. PNL survived, but the traditionally anti-communist party ended up in a joint platform with PSD, Băsescu's main adversary. The two parties were reluctant to form a coalition, but between 2007 and 2008 PSD supported the minority PNL-UDMR government. In 2012 they formed the PSD-PNL coalition government, which as its first act initiated the suspension of Băsescu.

Before the suspension, fearing a low turnout the PSD-PNL amended the regulation to remove the turnout threshold for a valid referendum. Although this amendment was struck down by the constitutional court, it intensified President Băsescu's attacks on PSD-PNL, accusing them of dismantling existing democratic institutions in a 'coup d'état' against the 'rule of law'. As a reaction to the attempt by

¹ In Romania the euro crisis slowed growth, but its economic and political effects were minor relative to the shock period of the financial crisis. Therefore, throughout this chapter 'economic crisis' refers to the shock period.

PSD-PNL to change the threshold, European leaders expressed concerns over the rule of law in Romania, but these concerns were criticised as partisan pro-Bănescu interventions. Fearing defeat, Bănescu called on his supporters to not turn out, and the referendum failed by being declared invalid. Nevertheless, PSD-PNL went on to campaign against an “illegitimate” president in the 2012 parliamentary election. Given the way institutions fell prey to party interests, many considered the 2012 procedure to suspend the president a political crisis.

In 2014 a new president, Klaus Iohannis (PNL), was elected on a platform of resetting and ‘normalising’ Romanian politics. Similarly to Bănescu, Iohannis ran with an anti-corruption message, which by this time had become the most salient issue. Even though it was less controversial, Iohannis followed Bănescu’s legacy and used his power to nominate the prime minister to block Sevil Shhaideh, the PSD candidate after the 2016 election. Somewhat paradoxically, his term coincided with both a strengthening of PSD and the rise of a new type of challenger AERP. To explain the former, Ban (2016) partly attributes PSD’s 2016 victory to the party’s opposition to PDL’s austerity measures. In this perspective, the austerity measures implemented by the centre-right PDL-UDMR government contributed to an ideological crystallisation of parties, in line with the alignment dynamic described in Chapter 1. In this view, the economic and political crises had not yet ceased to shape Romanian party competition.

10.6 Structure, Content and Stability in Party Competition

The four electoral campaigns studied cover the period before the Great Recession (2004), the start of the economic crisis (2008), the time of the political crisis (2012) and the aftermath of the crisis (2016). I start by presenting the development of issue salience and politicisation. Then, I explore the ways in which the mainstream parties took positions on the issues. Finally, I conclude by examining the political space in the four elections under consideration.

Issue Salience and Politicisation

Figure 10.1 presents the development of the salience and politicisation of issues related to the economy, culture, political competition/institutions and the fight against corruption.² Overall, as the figure shows, issues

² There is hardly any competition on issues related to security and defence. Therefore, I only include ‘new’ cultural issues.

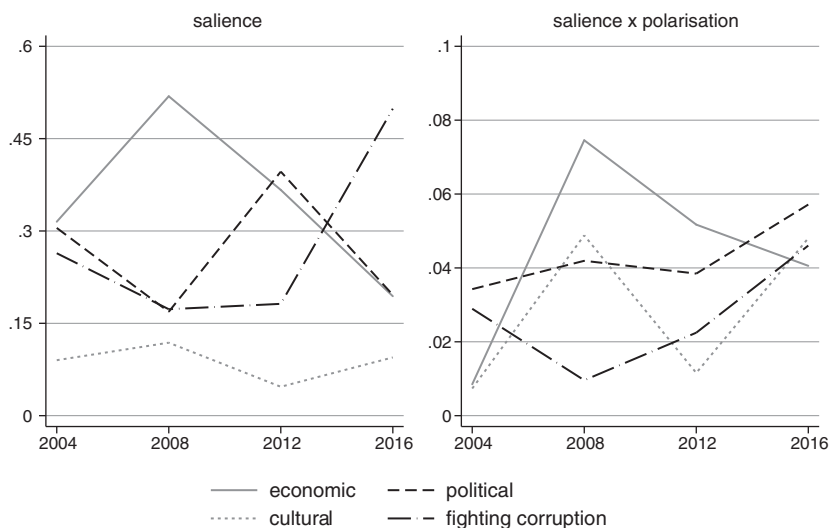


Figure 10.1 Salience and politicisation by issue domain in Romania

Note: The salience and polarisation measures are based on aggregates of the respective sub-categories shown in Table 3.2. For Romania, we coded the following two newspapers: *Adevărul* and *Ținutul Național* (for details, see Chapter 3).

related to the economy and the fight against corruption were the most salient in Romanian party competition. For instance, in 2008 over 50 per cent of the campaign revolved around economic issues, while in 2016 a similar share revolved around the fight against corruption. Issues related to political competition and institutions were almost as salient as the previous two categories, and they were the most salient in 2012. Unlike the regional pattern, issues related to the cultural dimension are less salient in Romanian politics: the salience of issues like nationalism and anti-communism stayed at around 10 percent across all four elections.

However, when we account for the different levels of polarisation and calculate the overall score for the politicisation of conflicts over these issue categories, their importance changes. Conflicts over economic issues and the fight against corruption were the most politicised, while the level of politicisation of political/institutional and cultural issues lies lower. The level of politicisation of all four issue categories varies over time. In the pre-crisis period (2004), we observe a low level of politicisation across all the categories. At the beginning of the economic crisis (2008) the politicisation of economic issues increased dramatically, and cultural

issues also became more politicised. During the political crisis (2012), the politicisation of economic and cultural issues declined while that of political issues increased. In the first post-crisis election (2016), all types of issue were more politicised, and the fight against corruption became the most politicised.

Although this analysis suggests a party system dominated by economic issues, there are three important caveats to consider. First, if one is to combine political/institutional issues with fighting corruption (as in the other chapters in this volume), the salience of these categories is higher than that of economic issues. This suggests that party competition in Romania was mostly related to 'polity contestation' and the fight against corruption. However, these issues are less polarising, partly because of the valence character of fighting corruption: everybody promises to do so. Second, competition on economic issues was to a considerable extent driven by promises to increase wages, either for everyone or for workers in a specific sector (e.g. in education). Opposition parties tried to outbid the government and promise higher spending if elected. Whereas electoral outbidding often served as a substitute for a strong welfare net and drove electoral participation, it did not produce the ideological debate one might expect on issues related to regulation of the economy. Third, cultural issues like nationalism were not salient but polarising and therefore politicised. Thus, next to the economic and the political, a more latent cultural dimension appears in Romanian politics.

The plots in Figure 10.1 clearly show the effects of the crises. At the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008 party competition became dominated by economic issues. If one takes a closer look, many of the economic issues were related to the positive economic record of the first Tăriceanu government and to demands for wages in certain sectors (e.g. education). By contrast, issues related to austerity or management of the economic crisis were not discussed. It was only in 2012 that management of the economic crisis appeared more forcefully on the agenda, with PSD-PNL accusing the outgoing PDL government of presiding over an economic/social disaster. Nevertheless, the 2012 campaign – as one would expect in the midst of a political crisis – was dominated by political issues. The reason why political issues were not more politicised is related to their low level of polarisation. Both PSD-PNL and PDL claimed they would save democracy from its enemies and promised to renew state institutions to serve the citizens and not a corrupt elite. In the post-crisis election in 2016 the issue of fighting corruption was the most salient, and for the first time it became more polarised, partly due to the emergence of AERPs. Cultural issues also appeared more clearly in 2016 among the most politicised ones. Overall, a comparison with the pre-crisis

period (2004) shows that party competition became more politicised during the crisis.

Party Positions

As the previous paragraphs might have suggested, most of the issues in Romanian politics do not produce a high level of polarisation. Figure 10.2 presents the positions of the three largest parties (PD/PDL, PNL, PSD) and one of the new challenger parties (USR)³ on issues related to the economy, politics, culture and fighting corruption during the four election campaigns.⁴

As the figure shows, parties are characterised by relatively large swings in their issue positions depending on the conflicts of the day. In terms of those taken by the mainstream parties, the PSD is commonly seen as the anchor of party competition (Florescu 2016). However, it changed its issue positions substantially during the period we examine. In 2004, the party combined a pro-welfare stance with cultural conservatism and was generally reluctant to fight corruption or invest in reforming the democratic institutions. This changed during the crisis. The party moderated its pro-welfare stance as it entered the 2012 coalition with PNL, and by 2016 it had switched to an economically liberal position. In cultural terms, PSD generally assumed a conservative position, except in 2008 when it tried to distance itself from being seen as the party of the former regime. However, its largest swings occurred with respect to issues related to democratic renewal. In 2008 PSD became the fiercest advocate of democratic renewal, driven by its opposition to what it considered to be the authoritarian tendencies of President Băsescu. The party moderated its stance on this issue in 2012, and, although it tried to attack President Iohannis with pro-democratic rhetoric in 2016, by that time it was seen as the party most reluctant to invest in renewing democracy.

The parties of the mainstream right, PD/PDL and PNL, tended to oppose positions associated with the PSD, except during the 2012 PSD–PNL coalition. Thus, from 2004 to 2012 PD/PDL assumed an economically liberal position, reluctantly embraced cultural liberalism and tried to distinguish itself by fighting corruption. The parties most obviously changed their position with respect to democratic renewal. In 2004, the PDL–PNL coalition called for democratic renewal, but in

³ Unfortunately, we do not have enough observations to map the positions of PRM or PPDD. In the case of the latter this is due to the party's almost exclusive reliance on its founder's TV channel to communicate with its voters.

⁴ To calculate these positions I exclude issue positions related to electoral outbidding.

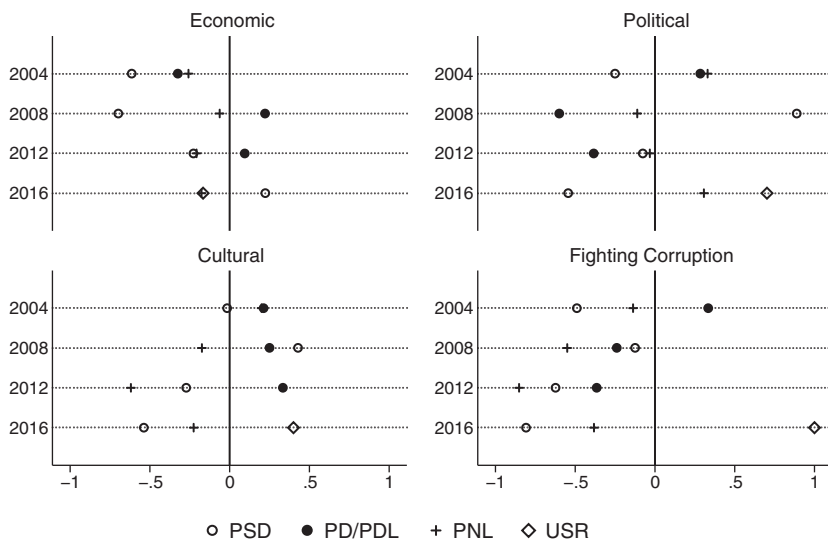


Figure 10.2 Positions of the Romanian parties by issue domain
 Note: The positional measures exclude the two ‘vague’ categories referring to the need for economic and political reforms in general (see Table 3.2 in Chapter 3 on methods).

2008 PDL was mostly associated with maintaining the status quo and avoiding any reforms. During the 2008 and the 2012 campaign, PDL had to defend President Bănescu against the PSD and PNL accusations that he was undermining democracy. Initially, PDL could count on some support from PNL for its economic stance and partly for its political stance, but this changed in 2012. As PNL entered the coalition with PSD, it assumed a pro-welfare economic position, radicalised in terms of cultural conservatism and joined the PSD’s call to renew democracy. In the 2016 campaign, following the fusion of PNL/PDL the new PNL tried to take a pro-welfare position against the by-now economically liberal PSD, remained culturally conservative but more liberal than the PSD and attacked the latter by promising to renew democracy.

Figure 10.2 also illustrates the relevance of political issues and fighting corruption in the AERPs’ challenge to the established formations. USR broke into the party system by mobilising on fighting corruption and reforming democracy. The party combined fighting corruption with a call for democratic renewal and culturally progressive positions.

The Political Space in Romania

Figure 10.3 presents the most popular parties' positions in the programmatic space during the four electoral campaigns to show how conflicts on the economic, cultural and political dimensions played out in party competition.

The figure shows an ever-changing ideological space from one election to the next. While the issue repertoire stayed relatively constant, with issues related to the economy (economic liberalism/welfare), politics (democratic renewal/reform, fighting corruption) and culture (anti-communism, nationalism) re-emerging in each of these campaigns, the dimensions of the political space and the party positions fluctuated. In terms of the dimensionality of the political spaces, we can distinguish between the two pre-crisis elections (including 2008) when cultural issues – nationalism in particular – did not yet structure the competition between the mainstream parties and the post-crisis elections when it did.

In 2004 we observe the lowest level of dimensionality. Economic issues play a central role in this election, but all three mainstream parties were very close to welfare with similar positions. As Figure 10.2 already indicated, this clearly changed by 2008, when PD/PDL took a more neoliberal economic position. In both elections, the second dimension opposed the mainstream parties to the radical right PRM. Instead of cultural issues, PRM campaigned with promises to fight corruption and in 2008 with an anti-communist discourse. While in 2004 PNL and PD/PDL ran on similar platforms of reforming democracy against the incumbent PSD, in 2008 PDL attacked the incumbent PNL on the issue of increasing salaries for teachers and university professors. In 2008 democratic reform gained an anti-Băsescu dimension, and, as we have already seen, the PSD was now the most supportive of the issue.

In 2012 and in 2016, nationalism came to play a central role in party competition. During the political crisis in 2012 the campaign was fought in a unidimensional space as a clash between two camps: PSD-PNL and PDL. The single dimension aligned economic and political/cultural contentions in terms of welfare versus neoliberalism and nationalism versus pro-EU stances. In the context of the 2012 election pro-EU meant PDL accusing PSD-PNL of Euroscepticism, while PSD-PNL accused EU leaders of intervening in domestic affairs to save their ally, Băsescu. At the time, PSD-PNL was running a nationalist campaign with slogans like 'We are proud to be Romanians' to mobilise supporters. Even though much less clearly than in previous campaigns, PSD-PNL took a pro-welfare stance at least with regards to PDL's austerity policies and promised to renew/reform democracy.

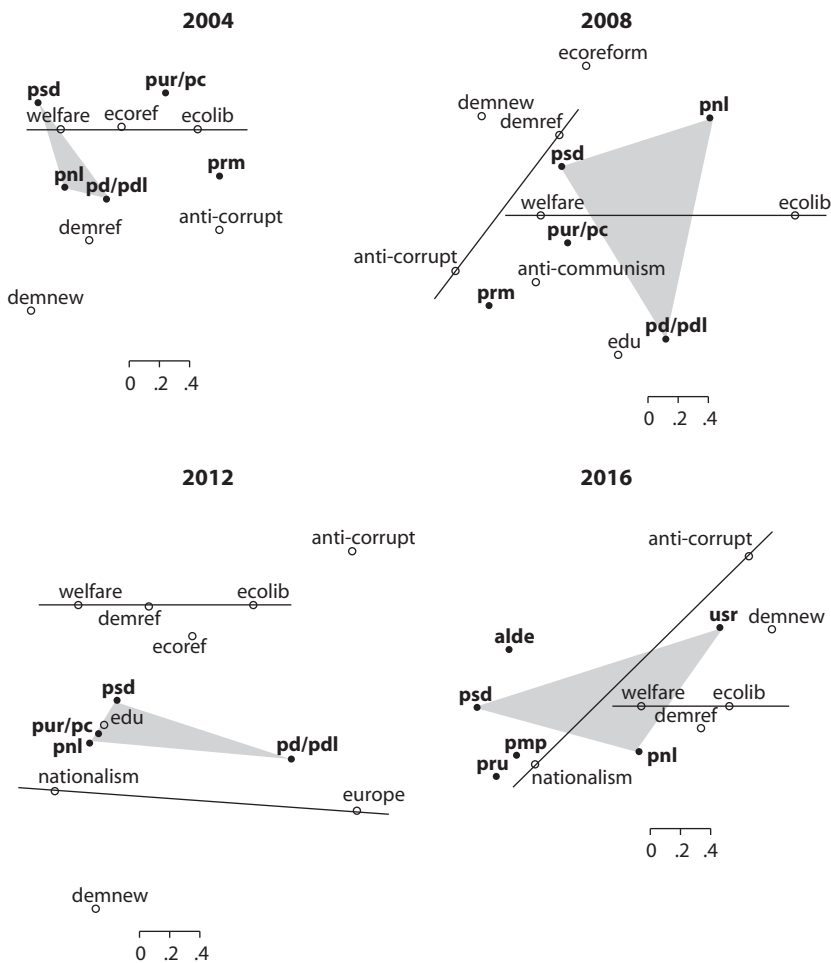


Figure 10.3 The structure of the Romanian political space

The 2016 election unfolded in a similar atmosphere except that economic issues played a much less important role compared to 2012. The two polar issues on the economic dimension were very close together and had little to no impact in structuring the political space. To some extent PNL assumed pro-welfare positions to distinguish itself from PSD. The second dimension opposed nationalism to anti-corruption. PSD, PMP and the radical-right PRU relied on a nationalist rhetoric against the incumbent ethnic German president and politicians with a foreign

background in USR. USR attacked the nationalism of PSD, PMP and PRU with a discourse on fighting corruption and renewing democracy. While PNL promised to reform democracy, the USR proposed a more concrete plan of institutional reforms. As opposed to 2004–2008, in 2016 USR took over the radical right's issue of fighting corruption. As Figure 10.3 shows, ALDE acted as a satellite organisation of PSD, similarly to PUR/PC in previous campaigns.

In all the elections, the second dimension related to political or cultural issues polarised political parties more than the economic dimension. Nevertheless, party positions fluctuated to a much greater extent on the political dimension than on the economic one. Party positions on political issues seem to have followed power relations in politics more closely than those on other dimensions. The party in government and the party of the sitting president defended the status quo, while opposition parties campaigned on reforming/renewing democracy. The crisis led to a rise in the relative importance of cultural issues in structuring the political space. As opposed to 2004–2008, in 2012–2016 cultural issues not only discriminated between mainstream and challenger parties but structured the competition between the mainstream parties as well.

10.7 Conclusions

Party competition in Romania as revealed by this analysis is characterised by a rather fluid political space, which allows shifting issue positions from one election to the other. Positions on political issues seem to closely follow parties' incumbency status and change according to shifts in political majorities. Nevertheless, like other countries in CEE, we have observed a cultural dimension on which parties take relatively clear positions (Chapter 1). However, cultural issues are the least salient, and campaigns are primarily fought on political issues and on fighting corruption. Given that parties change their positions the most often on these types of issue, the extent to which voters can distinguish between competing party formations on programmatic grounds is doubtful.

Nevertheless, Romanian parties are generally considered remarkably stable and able to survive over time. From this perspective, the economic and political crises were challenging for parties. However, as the election results show, with the notable exception of PDL the mainstream parties managed to survive. A key component of their resilience was their ability to avoid electoral accountability by shifting their issue positions. In this regard, the crisis did not break the existing pattern of party competition, and – in line with the main expectation of the

current volume on CEE dynamics – it contributed to a certain level of consolidation.

While the primary issues which allowed the mainstream parties to change their appeal were on the political dimension, the crisis led to the appearance of cultural issues, primarily nationalism. In the post-crisis election, it was not only the radical right which campaigned on nationalist ideas but mainstream parties – PSD in particular – too. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the strength of the radical right parties is in decline: the mainstream parties are taking up their primary issue. It has yet to be seen whether this dynamic will lead to a more salient cultural dimension or whether political issues will continue to dominate party competition.

The new parties which emerged during the crises do not provide a substantially different alternative. As the example of PPDD and USR shows, political issues played a crucial role in the emergence of these parties. Unlike new parties in southern Europe which emerged during the crisis, the new parties in Romania do not formulate a programmatic appeal to reform the economy or substantially change certain policies. As AERPs, their main programmatic appeal is formed around their issue positions on the political dimension and on the fight against corruption. However, these are the same issues which allow mainstream parties to exploit a fluid ideological structure and shift their issue positions.

The institutional set-up facilitates this dynamic. The semi-presidential structure imposes a conflict between the president and the prime minister on the issue repertoire of parliamentary elections. Despite changing the electoral calendar and eliminating overlaps between presidential and parliamentary elections, the two are clearly connected. In contrast to scholars who argue for a semi-presidential institutional design (Sartori 1994: 135–137), the Romanian case clearly shows that such a system damages the parties' role of providing clear electoral alternatives. By blurring responsibility and splitting incumbency between different parties, semi-presidentialism facilitates a dynamic where parliamentary campaigns are centred on parties competing over animosities and proposals for institutional reforms instead of policy alternatives. Moreover, the incentives for mainstream parties to invest in their programmatic appeals are rather low as long as they are able to capitalise on the lack of economic group identities with clientelistic resource allocation and on the electoral system which keeps newcomers away.

This analysis underlines problems of electoral accountability in Romania. Despite a long list of pressing problems involving economic

and social inequality, a high level of corruption and unstable institutions, voters do not have clear programmatic choices between the competing party formations. As the dynamic of competition during the economic and the political crises shows, parties tend to focus on issues detached from voters' concerns. Nevertheless, the facts that voters punished PDL and that two genuinely new parties (PPDD, USR) entered parliament show signs of party-system change.